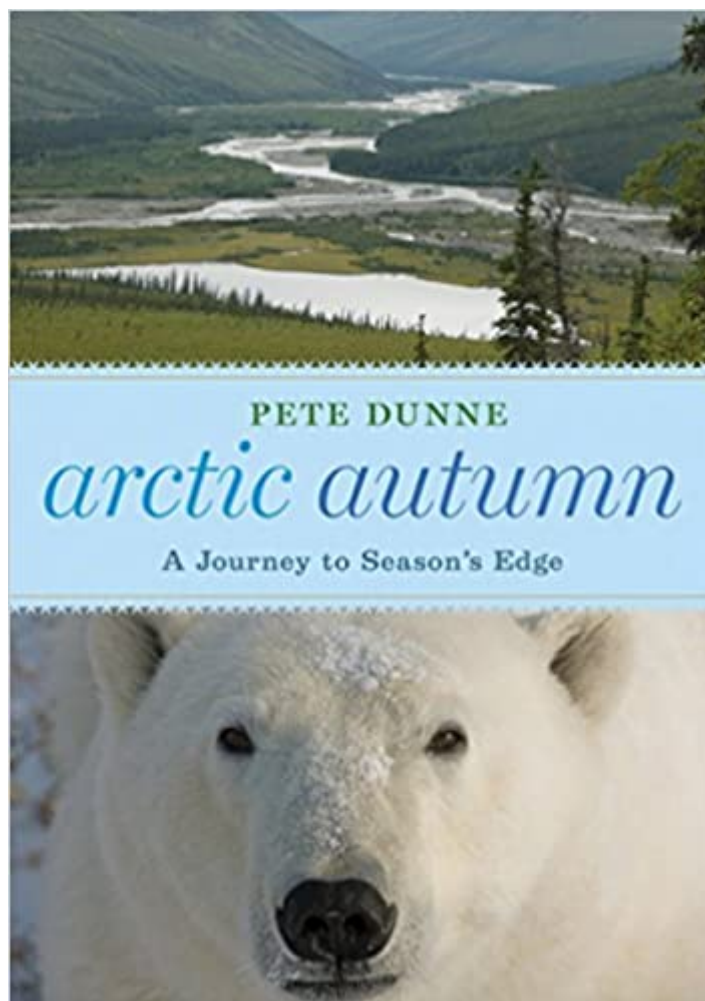


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Arctic Autumn: A Journey To Season's Edge



Synopsis

The Arctic doesn't spring to mind when most people think about autumn. Yet in his continuing effort to invite readers' curiosity through unpredictability, Pete Dunne chose to pair the transitional season of autumn with this fragile environment in flux. The book begins on Bylot Island in Nunavut, Canada, at the retreating edge of the seasonal ice sheet, then moves to Alaska, where the needs of molting geese go head to head with society's need for oil. Then on to the Barren Lands of Canada, and a search for the celebrated caribou herds that mean life and death for human and animal predators alike. A canoe trip down the John River is filled with memories, laughter, and contemplation; a caribou hunt with a professional trapper leads to a polemic on hunting; and Pete travels to an island in the Bering Sea, off the coast of Alaska, to look for rare birds and ponder the passionate nature of competitive bird listers. No trip to the Arctic would be complete without a trip to see polar bears, so Pete and his wife visit Churchill, Manitoba, the polar bear capital of the world. These majestic, but threatened, creatures lead Pete to think about his own life, our interactions with the natural world, and the importance of the Arctic, North America's last great wilderness.

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Customer Reviews

PETE DUNNE forged a bond with nature as a child and has been studying hawks for more than forty years. He has written fifteen books and countless magazine and newspaper columns. He was the founding director of the Cape May Bird Observatory and now serves as New Jersey Audubon's Birding Ambassador. He lives in Mauricetown, New Jersey.

Chapter 1 Moon Month of Nurreit (June), "Caribou Calves" Where Seasons Meet Bylot Island, Nunavut, Canada Expressions of caution and fortune exchanged, John turned and led the rest of the members of our group back to the camp at the mouth of the creek. As arranged, Linda and I struck out on our own, heading west. "How about over there?" I suggested, indicating the location of "over there" with a wave of my hand. Linda looked in the direction I was gesturing, taking in the snow-covered landscape, whose physical limits were defined by a distant ridge and the sky. "What distinguishes over there from over right here?" she wanted to know. Coming from the member of our team burdened by thirty pounds of camera gear, it was a legitimate question and maybe one that defied a satisfactory answer. The fact was, in these early stages of the summer thaw, one part of Canada's Bylot Island looks pretty much like any other—at least any part within hiking distance. Rising to the east were mountains whose color and pattern made them look like they'd been cast from scoops of vanilla fudge ice cream—but cheap vanilla fudge. The kind where they skimp on the fudge. To the north, bracketed by peaks, was the Aktineaq Glacier, one of the many ice sheets for which Canada's 22,252-square-kilometer Sirmilik National Park is named. Sirmilik, in the Inuktitut language of the native Inuit people, means "Place of Glaciers." To the west, somewhere beyond the visual limits of "over there" was a marshy plain that serves as the nesting ground for the world's largest breeding colony of greater snow geese. To the south, across twenty-five frozen miles of Eclipse Sound, was Baffin Island, the largest island in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago and home to the majority of the mostly Native residents of Canada's newest, and northernmost, province, Nunavut. There are very few places on the planet where you can look south onto Baffin Island, and, among the planet's nearly 7 billion human inhabitants, only a fraction might ever have dreamed of doing so. One of them was me. One of them was Linda. But wasn't the other one you? Yes, you. The onetime bright and slightly bored kid slouched in one of those plastic desk chairs that ruined the backs of a whole generation. Didn't you used to sit in class and stare, wistfully, at the pull-down map of the world covering the blackboard and marvel at that patchwork of islands way up there at the top of the world? A fragmented land whose color was no color at all. Not red or green or yellow like all the other landforms on the map but white! Snow white. Arctic white. Didn't you, as the disciplines that would turn us into well-adjusted and productive members of society were being instilled, study those northern lands and dream of being the adventurer every kid, deep in his heart, knows himself to be?

“Sure you did. There’s a little bit of Robert Service and Admiral Peary in all of us. And haven’t you, during all the responsible and productive adult years that followed, feasted upon the pages of travel and nature magazines in barbershops and hair salons (and chiropractic center waiting rooms), thrilling to images of those Arctic lands? Polar bears cradling cubs so winsome a panda could die of envy. Caribou herds so vast they filled whole treeless valleys and spilled into the next. Lilliputian flowers carpeting landscapes whose limits were fixed by the sky. And didn’t you, until the receptionist called your name, rekindle those classroom ambitions and vow that someday when the kids were raised, when the house was paid off you would finally become the explorer you were meant to be and head. . . .”

“Over there,” I said, in answer to Linda’s question, “will give us a much better view to the west.” It was a promise without foundation. Fact is, like you, I’d never been “over there” either, had no freaking idea what we might find. Linda greeted this explanation with silence.

“What we’re looking for is the place where everything comes together. Spring, summer, autumn, winter. A seasonal and geographic crossroads. A high point and a tipping point, symbolic of summer’s greatest advance and winter’s final stronghold.”

Silence.

“Like that point over there,” I said, pointing, once again, toward a volcano-shaped mound mantling a distant ridge.

“That is not an over there,” Linda pronounced. “That is an up there. And to get up there, we have to first slog across that low, wet marshy area down there. Even from here I can hear the gurgle of water flowing under what has to be some pretty rotten spring ice.”

Impressed and amused, I studied the pack-burdened form that was my wife—five feet, two inches of blond-haired, hazel-eyed, set-jawed indomitableness. We’ve been married over twenty years, traveling much of the time. She can walk, kayak, and photograph all day and then, in the evening, edit the day’s crop of images. She’s as organized as I am not and as patient as I am exasperating. In addition to being a wonderful partner, she is an accomplished outdoor traveler whose background includes stints as a park ranger in Alaska, an instructor for the National Outdoor Leadership School in Wyoming, and over a dozen wilderness trips in the Arctic.

In short, she’s the kind of person whose counsel (and objections) is worth listening to, whether you are traveling in the Arctic or not.

“You’re not part Inuit, are you?” I accused.

“No,” she said, letting some of her exasperation show with a slouch.

“You really think it’s too wet down there?” I said.

“No,” she corrected. “I just said it was wet and I wanted to know how important it is to go there before we find out how wet.”

“I do think the photo ops will be better up there,” I offered. “Down here you’re shooting in a bowl; up there we’ll be on top of the world.”

The photographer in Linda didn’t exactly rise to the bait, but she didn’t dismiss my analysis either. “We can try it,” she said, at last. “But we’re going to have to hurry. It’s only an hour until the solstice. Distance is hard to judge in the Arctic, and I’ll bet it is farther than it looks.”

We did hurry. And the terrain, for once, turned out to be not as bad as it looked. And now you know why Linda and I had flown twenty-four hundred miles from our home in New Jersey, been shaken and stirred for thirty miles over open ice in a snowmobile-drawn sled, and hiked five more just to be here. We were set to mark the onset of autumn, and begin the third book in our season series at the place where seasons meet. That place, recent reconnaissance suggested, lay “up there.”

Autumn? I know what you are thinking. Anybody who studied maps and dreamed of being an explorer certainly knows that June 21, the date of the solstice, usually marks the first day of summer, not autumn—and so it does! Technically and in fact. At 1806 Greenwich Mean Time, or 2:06 Eastern daylight-saving time—the politically adjusted time zone in which Bylot Island lies—the earth’s annual journey around the sun would reach one of its quarterly milestones: the point at which the Northern Hemisphere inclines at its maximum angle toward the sun. On this date, all points on and north of the Arctic Circle (66 degrees, 33 minutes north latitude) enjoy twenty-four hours of full sunlight. Were you to watch all day, you’d see the sun go completely around the sky and never dip below the horizon.

At 71 degrees, 5 minutes north latitude, the coordinates of southern Bylot Island, we would be so entertained. Also on this date, at noon, at all points above the tropic of Cancer (23.5 degrees north latitude), the sun reaches its highest point in the sky. Inhabitants experience the longest day of the year. The Northern Hemisphere receives a maximum amount of solar insolation. It is the pinnacle of summer! Tipping point, too. Because also technically and in fact, it’s all downhill from here. The day following the solstice finds the sun lower in the sky. All points lying directly on the Arctic Circle will see the sun dip below the horizon, and each successive day will see this period of disappearance increase. Day by day, less sunlight reaches the Northern Hemisphere. Day by day, the Arctic retreats deeper and faster into winter. The midpoint on this seasonal descent marks another quarterly milestone. It occurs on September 22 or 23. It is called the autumnal equinox. Across the most heavily populated

portions of the Northern Hemisphere, very probably where you live, relatively mild temperatures prevail. Not so at the earth's Arctic region. Because on that first official day of autumn, the sun does not appear at the North Pole at all. On the Arctic Circle, where the day is evenly divided between twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of darkness, at noon the sun rises a mere 23.5 degrees above the southern horizon, shedding light but little warmth on the earth below. In Fort Yukon, an Alaskan village lying just north of the Arctic Circle, the average daily high temperature in late September is in the low forties, and at night, the thermometer dips to the upper teens or low twenties. At Pond Inlet, the native village visible just across the channel, the average daily temperature in late September is in the low twenties. Summer in the Arctic is transforming but ephemeral. Autumn comes early and surrenders quickly. All of the Arctic's denizens, both the hardy ones that migrate seasonally and the hardier ones that remain year-round, accelerate their schedules accordingly. "All birds gone in September" is how one of our Inuit guides expressed it. Gone where? South. Fleeing to temperate lands where the sun is a year-round resident, not a timid visitor. So here on Bylot Island, high above the Arctic Circle, June 21 not only celebrates the first day of summer but also marks the first day of fall. The day the sun begins its retreat, and the earth begins its six-month slide into the Inuit moon month of Tauvikjuaq, "the Great Darkness."

http://www..com/gp/product/0618822216/ref=cm_cr_rev_prod_title I could barely put this book down. It's GREAT for anyone who as ever gone to Alaska or northern Canada - OR dreams of it. It has fabulous descriptions and imagery. He made me think in ways I never have about hunting, eating, the environment, travel, wildlife..... And I've thought about all these subjects a tremendous amount! The author even inspired me to sign up for the NJ Audubon 2012 Festival in Cape May at the end of this month. I hope to meet him there. (He is director of the Cape May Bird Observatory and vice president of the NJ Audubon Society and appearing to sign books.) My ONLY complaint was that there weren't enough photographs - especially as his wife as a photographer as noted frequently in the book!
Arctic Autumn: A Journey to Season's Edge [ARCTIC AUTUMN: A JOURNEY TO SEASON'S EDGE BY Dunne, Pete (Author) Sep-20-2011

a good read

This book is a collection of travelogues from trips to the Arctic from June to November. Pete Dunne is the director of the Cape May Bird Sanctuary in New Jersey, and author of several books on

natural observations. In this book, he describes a series of trips that he took, mainly with his wife, to the far northern reaches of North America. He begins the book on the summer solstice in June, noting that that's when the days begin to get shorter, so it is the logical start of autumn. The book is arranged by month, with separate chapters for trips taken throughout this period, 8 in all. The book includes a selection of photographs taken during these trips. This book is more a travelogue than a description of the natural environment of the North. Although Dunne does manage to include informative descriptions of creatures like the caribou and reindeer, he also describes many of the challenges of traveling and touring in the North. He provides a soulful essay on passing through the stages of life, and pauses to pontificate on global warming and how it is changing the environment, especially in the North. Since all of these trips are rather short in duration, a week or two here and there, or getting from here to there, Dunne never has the time to put down roots, to really breathe the Northern air and let it speak its mysteries to him. Thus, so many of his descriptions, informative though they may be, are quite superficial and could be drawn from secondary sources rather than direct observation. And it's hard to take a sermon on global warming seriously from someone who travels such long distances, consuming such great amounts of fuel, so frequently, just for the sake of travel or adventure.

...onto Baffin Island. Peter Dunn immediately "drew me in" when he described those days of youth, now so long ago, sitting in a classroom, and there would be a big pull-down map of the world over the chalk board. He didn't describe the map as a Mercator projection, which, even modified, makes the polar regions so much larger than they actually are. And way up at the top, along with a very large Greenland, is Baffin Island. And as the teacher droned on... as they tended to... how many of us made the vow that someday "I will get there"? Dunn nags. All the excuses we used to postpone the fulfillment of the promise: the kids, the mortgage, the career, et al. And now? He flaunts it. He is on Bylot Island, looking south, onto Baffin. Before being taunted though, I had already marked the first "mistake" in the book: the description under the first photograph, "The occasion is the Summer Solstice-first day of autumn, 2007." It was a "mistake" he quickly addressed, after the taunt, and he convinced me that in the arctic, autumn does commence immediately with the summer solstice. I felt in good hands. Dunn is a naturalist, hunter, "birder," author of numerous books of which I was unaware, like "Prairie Spring", which is now on my reading list, and an all-around perceptive observer. The book is divided into eight chapters, each a vignette involving a trip complementing his passion for the Canadian and Alaskan arctic. On virtually all the trips he is accompanied by his photographer wife Linda, and he seems to enjoy the camaraderie of long-term friends who share his

passion. He is an early riser, and that resonated, so he is the one who prepares the coffee, and has a quiet hour or so of observation as his traveling companions stay warm, and dreamy. There are the animals. For sure, there are the birds, and their heroic migrations, as well as the caribou, and their equally heroic wanderings. A top predator, the wolf, is covered, and the circumstances in which their "luck" might run out. The last chapter is a trip to Churchill, the "polar bear capital of the world," for some photography, and musings on the very real impact of global warming. And what would the arctic be without mosquitoes and black flies? Fortunately he is somewhat stoic about them, and does not belabor the agonies; certainly not enough for that child of long ago to conclude that Baffin is "one island too far." The author presents the reader with a sampling of the colorful two-legged mammals one may meet along the arctic road. There is Matthais, a Native, or "First Nations," as the Canadians now say, or an Eskimo, as we would have said when staring at that Mercator map, with a phenomenally well-tuned sense to the environment, and how it changes. Dunn uses the pseudonym, Esker Ed, for a failing tour operator who doesn't "deliver the goods," only far too many empty promises. Heimo is a one-time lad from Wisconsin, who went north, and fulfilled his dream, married a "native," and thus has the status, and hunts in the back of the beyond, forever free (we hope!) And there are the nine males, comfortably hunkered down on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, hoping the winds blow in some birds from Asia, so they can "punch their birder card." The author has a philosophical and political bent. Although I am not a hunter, I fully agreed with his explanation of his hunting "ethics." The same outlook covers his view of oil exploration on the North Slope. He knows he is very dependent on sufficient oil for his "lifestyle," and would find it most hypocritical to adopt a reflexive "NO" to the needs of our modern economy. I tried to make allowance for his position as Director of the Cape May Bird Observatory, but I STILL cannot understand the club of birdwatchers punching their cards trying to obtain the highest number (though I suppose it is more harmless, and less vapid than many other pursuits.) Envy. Ok, I have a bit, and the trip I enjoyed the most, vicariously, was the 12 day canoe trip, of the two couples, down the John River, on the south slope of the Brooks Range. With just a dash of alchemy, I hope to turn "envy," into "inspiration," and ultimately achieve the gold standard of "fulfillment." A solid 5-stars.

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